

A COMPARISON  
OF THE SELF-CONCEPT  
OF ELEMENTARY  
LEARNING DISABLED  
STUDENTS TO STUDENTS WITHOUT  
LEARNING DISABILITIES

MASTER'S PROJECT

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by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Purpose for the Study

Self-concept begins to form in the earliest years of life with school experiences either confirming or altering early self-perceptions. Success in school largely depends upon ability, motivation, and self-concept. Lyon and MacDonald (1990) state that academic self-concept is a predictor of achievement in school. Research by Chapman (1988) shows that students with positive self-concepts try harder and persist longer on difficult tasks. Hamachek (1990) states that achievement can be increased by improving self-concept. Positive school experiences reinforce a healthy self-concept, while negative school experiences increase poor self-esteem. Students with low self-esteem expect school failure, so they are not as motivated to achieve. Failure confirms these negative expectations and further lowers self-esteem.

It is widely assumed among educators that learning disabled students have poor self-concepts, especially in comparison to those who are not disabled. The research of Chapman (1988) shows that academic self-concept is lower for these disabled students than general self concept, which encompasses components such as social and physical self-esteem.

Although much of the literature demonstrates lower self-esteem of the learning disabled, some of the newer research shows conflicting results. The writer feels that further study is needed about the self-concept of learning disabled.

#### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the study was to compare the self-concept of elementary age learning disabled students to students without learning disabilities.

#### Assumptions

The writer assumed that students were identified correctly as learning disabled (LD) or not disabled. The writer further assumed that students responded honestly to the questionnaire. Finally, the writer assumed validity of the questionnaire.

#### Limitations

A limitation of the study was the sample size of approximately twenty-five LD and twenty-five non-LD students. The results of this study would be more conclusive with a larger number of students and with students drawn from a variety of socioeconomic neighborhoods.

#### Definition of Terms

Learning Disabled. Students identified by the school system as LD, and currently attending LD classes part-time.

Non-LD. Students not identified by the school system as LD, and not currently attending LD classes.

Self-concept. The perception of self involving attitudes, feelings, and knowledge of skills, abilities, appearance, and social acceptability. (Byrne, 1984). Self-concept encompasses both general and academic self-concept.

General self-concept. This is a wide range of perceptions of self including skills, abilities, appearance, and social acceptability.

Academic self-concept. This is school-related perceptions of self.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem is the same as self-valuing.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

#### Self-concept of the Learning Disabled

In their comparative study of LD, normal, and gifted students Winne, Woodland, and Wong (1982) found the LD students to have lower academic self-concept than either comparison group. The researchers randomly selected fourth through seventh grade students from a large suburban school district. Two self-concept inventories were used. On both scales the LD students evaluated their academic abilities to be lower in relation to the normal and gifted groups. In contrast, the LD students scored slightly higher than the comparison groups in both social and physical self-concept.

DeFrancesco and Taylor (1985) also found LD students to have lower self-concept scores than their nondisabled peers. In a rural setting they compared both primary and middle school LD with nondisabled students using four instruments to assess general self-concept. All instruments showed the general self-concept of LD students to be significantly lower than their nondisabled peers.

Beltempo and Achille (1990) found LD children to have markedly low self-concept. They compared four groups of urban elementary students. Three groups of LD students were the experimental groups and the control group was nondisabled. The self-concept of LD students was lower than the comparison group regardless of special education

placement.

In his review of studies of self-concept of the learning disabled Chapman (1988) found that although LD self-concept was lower than that of their nondisabled peers, it still was within the normal range; therefore, it could not be characterized as low self-concept. Academic self-concept was found to be lower than general self-concept. Chapman stated, "LD students invariably reported lower self-concept than either nonhandicapped contrast groups or full range 'normative' groups." He further found that decrements in self-concept had occurred by third grade and did not further deteriorate with time.

Kistner and Osborne (1987) also found that although the general and academic self-concept of the learning disabled was lower than their nondisabled peers, it did not become lower with time. The researchers found LD students to be realistic about their academic difficulties. The understanding that learning problems were a result of a disability protected the self-concept from further erosion. The researchers administered instruments measuring self-concept a second time, after a two-year interval, and found again that their general and academic self-concept was lower than their nondisabled peers. However, instead of their self-perception becoming lower with time, it improved slightly.

Chapman and Boersma (1979) found that the lower academic self-concept of the learning disabled generalized

to reduce the self-perception of general ability. Specifically, their self-perceptions were markedly lower in the areas of reading, spelling, and arithmetic. The researchers found that reading problems especially were associated with broad, negative perceptions of ability in addition to low academic confidence and negative attitudes toward school. Additionally, these researchers found that LD self-concept did not decrease with time.

Contradictory to much of the research in this area, Silverman and Zigmond (1983) found the self-concept scores of LD adolescents to be comparable to that of the nondisabled. These researchers attributed the contradictory findings of other researchers to inconsistency in the definitions of both LD and self-concept. They further attributed differing results to methodological differences, poor research design, and the use of many nonequivalent self-concept measuring instruments. The researchers further stated that the body of research in this area has been done mainly with elementary age children. What little research has been done with adolescents has produced conflicting results.

The researchers explained the difference in their results to several factors. First, by adolescence most LD students are placed in LD programs where they are mainstreamed part of the day and, consequently, have multiple reference groups. By this age many LD students compensate for academic weakness in other ways, such as

athletics, music, friendships, or jobs. LD students maintain a sense of self-worth from the satisfaction and feelings of accomplishment from these alternate activities. School success may be less important to their peer group, and therefore, to them. Finally, LD students may be less adept at picking up cues from others that tell them they are incompetent, and in so doing, protect the self-concept.

Also in contradiction to most research, Coleman, McHam, and Minnett (1992) found that the self-concept of the learning disabled was similar to low achieving nondisabled students. Their study compared urban elementary LD students to a similar group experiencing academic difficulties. The LD students had self-concept scores similar to the comparison group, but rated themselves as less lonely, perhaps because of friendships formed in special education classes. Their peers in special education classes had similar social skills and so they were given an opportunity to practice and improve their own social skills. These authors also attributed the favorable self-concept results to the multiple reference groups provided by mainstreamed and special education classes. The researchers stated that placement in LD may have provided to themselves and others an explanation of their learning problems, reduced failure, and heightened self-respect.

#### Factors Affecting LD Self-concept

Several researchers found educational placement to be a factor affecting the self-concept of the learning disabled.

Battle and Blowers (1982) compared two groups of urban students enrolled in first through seventh grades. A group of nondisabled students was compared to students enrolled in classes for either the learning disabled or educable mentally retarded. The special education students scored lower on both pretest and posttests of self-concept. However, the researchers found the special education students had greater gains in self-esteem and of perception ability over the two-year period of the study.

Beltempo and Achille (1990) found three types of effect of special class placement. They found that maximum special education placement or no special education placement results in persisting low self-concept. The authors stated that, "Learning disabilities without remediation may have a stigmatic effect on the global dimensions of self-concept which lasts for at least the first year." A combination of resource classes and mainstreaming was found to most help learning disabled students improve in self-concept, because of the opportunity to identify with multiple reference groups. Receiving some remedial help was associated with higher self-concept for LD students. It was of interest that all LD groups improved in self-concept at least marginally during the ten month duration of this study. The researchers attributed this improvement to maturation.

Several researchers found gender to be a factor affecting the self-concept of LD students. Kistner and Osborne (1987) found gender to be a main effect for self-

concept measures. Girls rated themselves more negatively than the boys did. This was true of both the LD and the nondisabled groups.

Beltempo and Achille (1990) found gender differences in their study which showed LD girls to have much lower self-concept than LD boys. The researchers stated that the gender differences in their study may have resulted from the socialization process in which girls were more vulnerable to societal pressures and expectations than boys.

Behavior disorders were found by Durrant, Cunningham, and Voelker (1990) to be a factor negatively affecting LD self-concept. The scores of the non-behavior-disordered LD group were higher than the behavior-disordered LD group. The self-concept scores of the LD non-behavior-disordered group were similar to the nondisabled group. The researchers stated, "On the basis of ANOVA results, self-concept appears to be related to behavioral difficulties primarily and to learning disability secondarily." These researchers stated that previous research about LD self-concept may have been confounded by the use of unspecified subject samples.

#### Implications

Kistner and Osborne (1987) stated the first implication of this research about LD self-concept. It is important to explain the nature of learning disabilities to students in a way that facilitates development of positive self-concept and adaptive achievement attribution. Being labelled LD and

receiving special education services may serve as an explanation of learning problems and in so doing cushion the self-concept of LD students. Conversely, it may create a sense of futility in the LD student; therefore, the researchers stated that it is crucial to explain the nature of learning disabilities in a way that will foster positive self-concept and belief in achievement situations. The writers stated the need for further research in this area.

An implication of the research of DeFrancesco and Taylor (1985) is that deficiencies in self-concept should be considered when planning educational programs, so that enhanced self-concept can increase confidence to meet challenges. Activities, both educational and extra-curricular, should be carefully planned so that the LD student is likely to experience success. This will help bolster fragile LD self-concept, which will lead to greater confidence in attempting greater challenges. Opportunities for success outside the educational arena will also lead to gains in self-concept.

An implication of the research of Beltempo and Achille (1990) is that a combination of special education and regular class placement seems to be optimal for developing healthy LD self-concept, partly because it gives the LD student multiple reference groups. Further, because negative self-concept has developed by third grade, these researchers stated the importance of identifying students as LD prior to second or third grade. This often does not occur

in many school districts. The implications of this research are also important to consider because inclusion of special education students in regular classrooms is gaining more acceptance. With inclusion often the student is placed full-time in regular classrooms, which according to the research of Beltempo and Achille, may lead to lower self-concept. Educators need to consider whether the possible educational benefits of inclusion outweigh possible decrements in LD self-concept or whether the two are inversely related.

In the research of Battle and Blowers (1982) is a final, and related implication. The affective as well as the cognitive domains need to be considered in developing programs and instruction for the learning disabled. Self-esteem is important to achievement of academic success. It is crucial that educational programs promote feelings of self-worth, especially for students who experience learning problems. Specific educational strategies need to be developed to promote greater academic success for LD students. This in turn will improve self-esteem, which will increase the probability of academic success.



## CHAPTER III

### PROCEDURE

#### Subjects

The fifty-two participants of this study were fourth and fifth grade students who attended one urban elementary school. (See Table 1.) Twenty-three students attended LD Resource Room on a part-time basis. Twenty-nine participants were not disabled. There were twenty-three fourth graders and twenty-nine fifth graders. Fourteen of the participants were girls, and thirty-eight were boys. The students came from four homerooms: two fifth grades, one fourth grade and a combination third-fourth grade.

Two classroom teachers assisted the researcher administer the questionnaire. A fifth grade teacher administered the survey to the twenty-four students in her homeroom, which included eight LD students. A fourth grade teacher administered the questionnaire to the thirteen students in her homeroom who were not disabled. The researcher administered the survey to ten fourth graders and the remaining five fifth grade students.

#### Setting

School. The setting for this study was an urban elementary school of approximately two hundred-eighty students. Approximately thirty-seven percent of the student population qualified for free or reduced price lunch. The students came from low to middle socioeconomic backgrounds.

Most of the students lived in the school neighborhood and walked to school. Only the special education students were bussed from other neighborhoods.

District. The school was part of an urban Ohio district. The district had over sixty-three thousand students enrolled.

#### Data Collection

Construction of the Data Collecting Instrument. A questionnaire of twenty-six "yes" or "no" statements was constructed based upon review of the literature. The statements that corresponded with a positive self-concept were phrased in both positive and negative forms, so that students would not simply select all positive or all negative responses. Twelve statements were high self-esteem statements, fourteen were low self-esteem items. Statements described both academic and general aspects of self-concept, including physical, social, and emotional attributes.

In addition to the questionnaire a response sheet was developed. The first section of the response sheet was comprised of demographic information for the student to circle appropriately. The response sheet was numbered to twenty-six and paired with each number were the responses "yes" and "no" for the student to select and circle.

Administration of the Data Collecting Instrument. The questionnaire was administered simultaneously to the three groups of students the morning of Friday, January 28, 1994. Two groups were administered the questionnaire in

homeroom by their homeroom teachers. The third group completed the questionnaire in the resource room. To compensate for any reading disabilities each group was read the questionnaire by their teacher while responses were circled on the response sheets. The questionnaire took approximately ten minutes to administer. Students were instructed to circle the response that best described themselves. They were instructed to complete each item and to circle only one response for each item.

## Questionnaire to Be Read by Researcher to Students

1. I get in trouble often.
2. I am good at solving problems.
3. I worry about tests in school.
4. I am good at math.
5. I am good at working with my hands.
6. I am good looking.
7. I am a good worker.
8. I am weak.
9. I learn fast.
10. I am a good artist.
11. I am smart.
12. Kids make fun of me.
13. I am mean.
14. I have a good imagination.
15. I wish I were different.
16. I am proud of the work I do in school.
17. I disappoint my family.
18. I am good at sports or games.
19. I forget things I learn.
20. I feel left out of things often.
21. I fib a lot.
22. It makes me nervous when the teacher calls on me.
23. I am shy.
24. I have good ideas.
25. I lose my temper a lot.
26. I am sad often.

## Response Sheet

Girl or Boy

Grade 4 or Grade 5

SLD or Not-SLD

1    yes    no

2    yes    no

3    yes    no

4    yes    no

5    yes    no

6    yes    no

7    yes    no

8    yes    no

9    yes    no

10   yes    no

11   yes    no

12   yes    no

13   yes    no

14   yes    no

15   yes    no

16   yes    no

17   yes    no

18   yes    no

19   yes    no

20   yes    no

21   yes    no

22   yes    no

23   yes    no

24   yes    no

25   yes    no

26   yes    no

TABLE 1  
GRADE LEVEL AND GENDER OF LD AND NON-LD GROUPS

	Grade 4		Grade 5	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
LD	8	2	11	2
NON-LD	9	4	10	6

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Presentation of Results

The descriptive results of this study are presented in Table 2 and Table 3. To facilitate comparison of the LD and non-LD groups, percentages of positive self-concept responses were computed for each question for boys, girls, LD, and non-LD groups. For some questions a "yes" response was considered a positive self-concept response, but for other questions the "no" response indicated positive self-concept. The questions for which a "no" response indicated positive self-concept are the following: 1, 3, 8, 12, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, and 26. A "yes" response indicated positive self-concept for the remainder of the questions.

In addition to percentages, the mean was computed for the positive self-concept responses of the girl, boy, LD, and non-LD groups. Percentages and means were rounded to the nearest whole number.

#### Discussion of Results

In this study the mean of the positive self-concept responses of the LD students was only slightly lower than that of the non-LD students. (See Table 1.) Both groups appeared to have healthy self-concepts. These results are in contrast to much of the research in this area which shows

LD self-concept to be markedly lower than that of the nondisabled. These results do support the research of Chapman (1988), Silverman and Zigmond (1983), and Coleman, McHam, and Minnett (1992). These researchers found the self-concept of LD students to be equal to or only slightly lower than that of the nondisabled.

Girls appeared to have slightly higher positive self-concept responses than the boys. The mean differences between the girls and boys do not appear to be significant. This contradicts the findings of Kistner and Osborne (1987) who found girls to rate themselves lower in self-concept than boys. However, in this study both the boys and the girls showed healthy self-concepts overall. (See Table 2.)

Of more significance were the differences in responses of the groups to the individual questions. On four of the questions the LD students scored more than five percent higher in positive self-concept responses than the non-LD group. They rated themselves higher in physical appearance, math, honesty, and in lack of anxiety when called on by a teacher.

The nondisabled students rated themselves more than five percent higher than the LD students on eight questions. They perceived themselves better in the areas of behavior, learning rate, art, peer acceptance, family acceptance, imagination, ideas, and skill at sports and games.

Although the mean of the positive self-concept



responses was similar for boys and girls, there were numerous gender differences between the groups for individual questions. The girls and boys had similar responses to only five of the questions. The girls rated themselves more than five percent greater in positive self-concept for the following areas: behavior, kindness, temper control, honesty, peer acceptance, family acceptance, work habits, problem solving, and pride in schoolwork. The boys rated themselves more than five percent higher in the following areas: strength, art, math, extroversion, happiness, lack of test anxiety, imagination, sports and games ability, activity inclusion, and lack of anxiety when called on by a teacher.

In summary, the self-concept of LD students appeared to be slightly lower than that of the nondisabled. Girls rated themselves slightly higher than boys. The girls, boys, LD and non-LD groups all appeared to have healthy self-concept.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGES OF POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT RESPONSES FOR LD AND  
NON-LD STUDENTS

Question	LD	NON-LD
1. I get in trouble often.	52	59
2. I am good at solving problems.	74	76
3. I worry about tests in school.	22	24
4. I am good at math.	83	69
5. I am good at working with my hands.	91	90
6. I am good looking.	83	76
7. I am a good worker.	83	86
8. I am weak.	83	83
9. I learn fast.	70	79
10. I am a good artist.	57	72
11. I am smart.	91	93
12. Kids make fun of me.	48	76
13. I am mean.	78	83
14. I have a good imagination.	83	97
15. I wish I were different.	74	76
16. I am proud of the work I do in school.	91	86
17. I disappoint my family.	70	86
18. I am good at sports or games.	87	93
19. I forget things I learn.	43	48
20. I feel left out of things often.	61	59
21. I fib a lot.	83	76
22. It makes me nervous when the teacher calls on me.	43	28
23. I am shy.	74	69
24. I have good ideas.	87	93
25. I lose my temper a lot.	43	41
26. I am sad often.	65	62
	$\bar{X}=70$	$\bar{X}=72$

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGES OF POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT RESPONSES FOR GIRLS AND BOYS

Question	GIRLS	BOYS
1. I get in trouble often.	86	45
2. I am good at solving problems.	93	68
3. I worry about tests in school.	7	29
4. I am good at math.	57	82
5. I am good at working with my hands.	93	89
6. I am good looking.	86	76
7. I am a good worker.	100	79
8. I am weak.	64	89
9. I learn fast.	79	74
10. I am a good artist.	57	68
11. I am smart.	93	92
12. Kids make fun of me.	71	61
13. I am mean.	93	76
14. I have a good imagination.	86	92
15. I wish I were different.	79	74
16. I am proud of the work I do in school.	100	84
17. I disappoint my family.	100	71
18. I am good at sports or games.	79	95
19. I forget things I learn.	50	45
20. I feel left out of things often.	50	63
21. I fib a lot.	86	78
22. It makes me nervous when the teacher calls on me.	29	37
23. I am shy.	50	79
24. I have good ideas.	93	89
25. I lose my temper a lot.	50	39
26. I am sad often.	57	66
	$\bar{X}=73$	$\bar{X}=71$

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

Self-concept begins to form in the earliest years of life with school experiences either confirming or altering early self-perceptions. Success in school largely depends upon ability, motivation, and self-concept. Research has shown that academic self-concept is a predictor of achievement in school and that students with positive self-concept try harder and persist longer. Further research showed that achievement can be increased by improving self-concept. Positive school experiences reinforce a healthy self-concept, while negative school experiences increase poor self-esteem. Students with low self-esteem expect school failure; therefore, they are not as motivated to learn. Failure confirms negative expectations and further lowers self-esteem. Much of the literature has demonstrated the lower self-esteem of the learning disabled, but some of the newer research has yielded conflicting results.

The purpose of this study was to compare the self-concept of elementary age learning disabled students to students without learning disabilities.

A questionnaire of twenty-six "yes" or "no" statements was constructed based upon a review of the literature. Twelve statements indicated high self-esteem, fourteen statements indicated low self-esteem. Statements described

both general and academic aspects of self-concept. A response sheet was also constructed.

The questionnaire was read simultaneously to the LD students and two groups of nondisabled students. The instrument took approximately ten minutes to administer. Students were instructed to circle the response that best described themselves and to circle only one response for each item.

This study found the self-concept of each group studied to be healthy. The self-concept of the LD students was only slightly lower than that of the nondisabled students. The self-concept of the girls was found to be only slightly higher than that of the boys. Differences between the groups were more apparent on individual questions.

### Conclusions

From this study the researcher has concluded that although the self-concept of learning disabled students may be somewhat lower than that of their nondisabled peers, they still have normal self-esteem. This researcher feels that LD students find areas other than academics in which to excel. Academic success may be less important to them than social relationships, athletics, hobbies, or other interests.

Another possibility is that LD students by virtue of their disability and participation in special education classes do not have accurate perception of themselves and their abilities. This would in a sense serve to protect

their self-esteem. Being diagnosed as LD serves as an explanation for their struggles with academics.

This study showed the self-concept of boys to be only slightly lower than girls, yet both groups to have generally positive self-concept. Although both groups demonstrated healthy self-concept, there were large differences between the two groups in their response to individual questions. The gender differences seemed to show that the girls rated themselves higher in areas demonstrating compliance and social adjustment. The boys rated themselves higher in areas demonstrating extroversion, activity, and confidence.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Further research is needed in the area of LD self-concept. The conflicting results over the years demonstrate the need for additional research in this area. It needs to be established whether or not the conflicting results are due to the use of self-concept measuring instruments which are not comparable. If that is the case, then the most accurate instruments and designs need to be established.

Further, if the differences are not due to instrumentation, it needs to be determined whether the differences are due to differences in the comparison groups. For example, there is a need for further investigation into the research suggesting that the differences in self-concept between LD and nondisabled students may be due to a higher rate of behavior disorders in the LD population.

If the newer findings of little differences in self-concept between LD and nondisabled students become substantiated by further research, a new question to investigate is the reason for this. This writer feels research is needed to examine whether the current practice of a combination of special education and regular education services has impacted LD self-concept.

In addition, the researcher sees a need for further research into gender differences in self-concept. Possible avenues of investigation are patterns of gender differences and the reasons for the differences.

This researcher feels that educators must look at the ways in which they explain the nature of learning disabilities to their disabled students. This must be accomplished in a way that encourages the development of positive self-concept and promotes the belief that effort produces achievement.

Self-concept should be considered when planning instruction and educational programs for all students, but especially with special education students. Enhancing self-concept will increase the confidence of students to meet educational challenges and other challenges of life.

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